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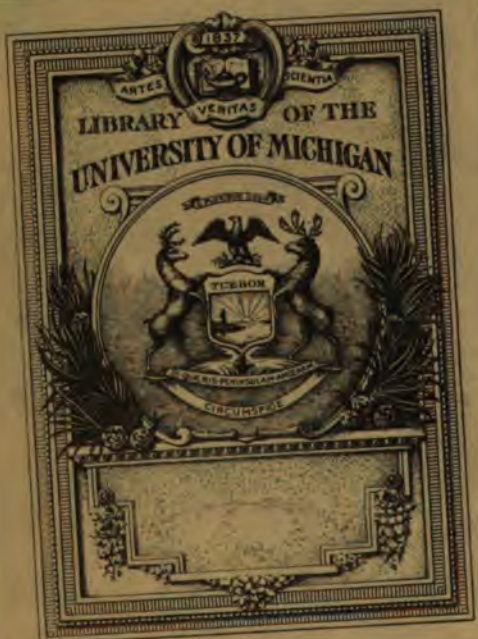
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Critical Reflections

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ON THE

Old *Engliſh* Dramatick Writers;

Intended as a

PREFACE

TO THE

Works of MASSINGER.

Addreſſed to

DAVID GARRICK, Eſq;

by George Colman, Esq.

LONDON:

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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

ON THE

Old *Engliſh* Dramatick Writers.

To *DAVID GARRICK*, Eſq;

SIR,

IT is not unnatural to imagine that, on the firſt Glance of your Eye over the Advertiſement of a new Pamphlet, addreſſed to yourſelf, you are apt to feel ſome little Emotion; that you beſtow more than ordinary Attention on the Title, as it ſtands in the News-Paper, and take Notice of the Name of the Publiſher.—Is it Compliment or Abuſe?—One of theſe being determined, you are perhaps eager to be ſatisfied, whether ſome coarſe Hand has laid on Encomiums with a Trowel, or ſome more elegant Writer, (ſuch as the Author of *the Actor* for Inſtance) has done Credit to himſelf and you by his Panegyrick; or, on the other Hand, whether any offended Genius has employed thoſe Talents againſt You, which he is ambitious of

exerciſing in the Service of your Theatre; or ſome common Scribe has taken your Character, as he would that of any other Man or Woman, or Miniſter, or the King, if he durſt, as a popular Topick of Scandal.

Be not alarmed on the preſent occaſion; nor, with that Conſciouſneſs of your own Merit, ſo natural to the Celebrated and Eminent, indulge yourſelf in an Acquieſcence with the Juſtice of ten thouſand fine Things, which you may ſuppoſe ready to be ſaid to you. No private Satire or Panegyrick, but the general Good of the Republick of Letters, and of the Drama in particular, is intended. Though Praiſe and Diſpraiſe ſtand ready on each Side, like the Veſſels of Good and Evil on the Right and Left Hand of *Jupiter*, I do not mean to dip into either: Or, if I do, it ſhall be, like the Pagan Godhead himſelf, to mingle a due Proportion of each. Sometimes, perhaps, I may find Fault, and ſometimes beſtow Commendation: But you muſt not expect to hear of the Quickneſs of your Conception, the Juſtice of your Execution, the Expreſſion of your Eye, the Harmony of your Voice, or the Variety and Excellence of your Deportment; nor ſhall you be malicioufly informed that you are ſhorter than *Barry*, leaner than *Quin*, and leſs a Favourite of the Upper Gallery than *Woodward* or *Shuter*.

The following Pages are deſtined to contain a Vindication of the Works of *Maſſinger*; one of our old dramatick Writers, who very ſeldom falls much beneath *Shakeſpeare* himſelf, and ſometimes almoſt riſes to a proud Rivalſhip of his chiefeſt Excellencies. They are meant too as a laudable, though faint, Attempt to reſcue theſe admirable Pieces from the too general Neglect, which they now labour under, and to recommend them to the Notice of the Publick. To whom then can ſuch an Eſſay be more properly inſcribed than to you, whom that Publick ſeems to have appointed, as its chief *Arbiter Deliciarum*;

ciarum, to preſide over the Amuſements of the Theatre?—But there is alſo, by the bye, a private Reaſon for addreſſing you. Your honeſt Friend *Davies*, who, as is ſaid of the provident Comedians in *Holland*, ſpends his Hours of Vacation from the Theatre in his Shop, is too well acquainted with the Efficacy of your Name at the Top of a Play-Bill, to omit an Opportunity of prefixing it to a new Publication; hoping it may prove a Charm to draw in Purchaſers, like the Head of *Shakeſpeare* on his Sign. My Letter too being anonymous, your Name at the Head, will more than compenſate for the Want of mine at the End of it: And our above-mentioned Friend is, no Doubt, too well verſed in both his Occupations, not to know the Conſequence of Secrecy in a Bookſeller, as well as the Neceſſity of concealing from the Publick many Things that paſs *behind the Curtain.*

There is perhaps no Country in the World more ſubordinate to the Power of Faſhion, than our own. Every Whim, every Word, every Vice, every Virtue in its Turn becomes the Mode, and is followed with a certain Rage of Approbation for a Time. The favourite Stile in all the polite Arts, and the reigning Taſte in Letters, are as notoriouſly Objects of Caprice as Architecture and Dreſs. A new Poem, or Novel, or Farce, are as inconſiderately extolled or decried as a Ruff or a *Chineſe* Rail, a Hoop or a Bow Window. Hence it happens, that the Publick Taſte is often vitiated: Or if, by Chance, it has made a proper Choice, becomes partially attached to one Species of Excellence, and remains dead to the Senſe of all other Merit, however equal, or ſuperior.

I think I may venture to aſſert, with a Confidence, that on Reflection it will appear to be true, that the eminent Claſs of Writers, who flouriſhed at the Beginning of this Century, have almoſt entirely ſuperſeded their illuſtrious Predeceſſors. The Works of *Congreve*, *Vanburgh*, *Steele*, *Addiſon*, *Pope*, *Swift*, *Gay*, &c. &c. are the chief Study of the Million: I

ſay, of the Million, for as to thoſe few, who are not only familiar with all our own Authors, but are alſo converſant with the Antients, they are not to be circumſcribed by the narrow Limits of the Faſhion. *Shakeſpeare* and *Milton* ſeem to ſtand alone, like firſt-rate Authors, amid the general Wreck of old *Engliſh* Literature. *Milton* perhaps owes much of his preſent Fame to the generous Labours and good Taſte of *Addiſon*. *Shakeſpeare* has been tranſmitted down to us with ſucceſſive Glories; and you, Sir, have continued, or rather increaſed, his Reputation. You have, in no fulſome Strain of Compliment, been ſtiled the Beſt Commentator on his Works: But have you not, like other Commentators, contracted a narrow, excluſive, Veneration of your Author? Has not the Contemplation of *Shakeſpeare*'s Excellencies almoſt dazzled and extinguiſhed your Judgment, when directed to other Objects, and made you blind to the Merit of his Cotemporaries? Under your Dominion, have not *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, nay even *Jonſon*, ſuffered a Kind of theatrical Diſgrace? And has not poor *Maſſinger*, whoſe Cauſe I have now undertaken, been permitted to languiſh in Obſcurity, and remained almoſt entirely unknown?

To this perhaps it may be plauſibly anſwered, nor indeed without ſome Foundation, that many of our old Plays, though they abound with Beauties, and are raiſed much above the humble Level of later Writers, are yet, on ſeveral Accounts, unfit to be exhibited on the modern Stage; that the Fable, inſtead of being raiſed on probable Incidents in real Life, is generally built on ſome foreign Novel, and attended with romantick Circumſtances; that the Conduct of theſe extravagant Stories is frequently uncouth, and infinitely offenſive to that dramatick Correctneſs preſcribed by late Criticks, and practiſed, as they pretend, by the *French* Writers; and that the Characters, exhibited in our old Plays, can have no

pleaſing

pleaſing Effect on a modern Audience, as they are ſo totally different from the Manners of the preſent Age.

Theſe, and ſuch as theſe, might once have appeared reaſonable Objections: But you, Sir, of all Perſons, can urge them with the leaſt Grace, ſince your Practice has ſo fully proved their Inſufficiency. Your Experience muſt have taught you, that when a Piece has any ſtriking Beauties, they will cover a Multitude of Inaccuracies; and that a Play need not be written on the ſevereſt Plan, to pleaſe in the Repreſentation. The Mind is ſoon familiarized to Irregularities, which do not ſin againſt the Truth of Nature, but are merely Violations of that ſtrict Decorum, of late ſo earneſtly inſiſted on. What patient Spectators are we of the Inconſiſtencies that confeſſedly prevail in our darling *Shakeſpeare!* What critical Catcall ever proclaimed the Indecency of introducing the Stocks in the Tragedy of *Lear?* How quietly do we ſee *Gloſter* take his imaginary Leap from *Dover* Cliff! Or to give a ſtronger Inſtance of Patience, with what a philoſophical Calmneſs do the Audience doſe over the tedious, and unintereſting, Love-Scenes, with which the bungling Hand of *Tate* has coarſely pieced and patched that rich Work of *Shakeſpeare!*—To inſtance further from *Shakeſpeare* himſelf, the Grave-diggers in *Hamlet* (not to mention *Polonius*) are not only endured, but applauded; the very Nurſe in *Romeo* and *Juliet* is allowed to be Nature; the Tranſactions of a whole Hiſtory are, without Offence, begun and compleated in leſs than three hours; and we are agreeably wafted by the *Chorus*, or oftener without ſo much Ceremony, from one End of the World to another.

It is very true, that it was the general Practice of our old Writers, to found their Pieces on ſome foreign Novel; and it ſeemed to be their chief Aim to take the Story, as it ſtood, with all its appendant Incidents of every Complexion, and throw it into Scenes,

Scenes. This Method was, to be ſure, rather inartificial, as it at once overloaded and embarraſſed the Fable, leaving it deſtitute of that beautiful dramatick Connection, which enables the Mind to take in all its Circumſtances with Facility and Delight. But I am ſtill in Doubt, whether many Writers, who come nearer to our own Times, have much mended the Matter. What with their Plots, and Double-Plots, and Counter-plots, and Under-Plots, the Mind is as much perplexed to piece out the Story, as to put together the disjointed Parts of our ancient Drama. The Comedies of *Congreve* have, in my Mind, as little to boaſt of Accuracy in their Conſtruction, as the Plays of *Shakeſpeare*; nay, perhaps, it might be proved that, amidſt the moſt open Violation of the leſſer critical Unities, one Point is more ſteadily perſued, one Character more uniformly ſhewn, and one grand Purpoſe of the Fable more evidently accompliſhed in the Productions of *Shakeſpeare* than of *Congreve*.

Theſe Fables (it may be further objected) founded on romantick Novels, are unpardonably wild and extravagant in their Circumſtances, and exhibit too little even of the Manners of the Age in which they were written. The Plays too are in themſelves a Kind of heterogeneous Compoſition; ſcarce any of them being, ſtrictly ſpeaking, Tragedy, Comedy, or even Tragi-Comedy, but rather an indigeſted Jumble of every Species thrown together.

This Charge muſt be confeſſed to be true: But upon Examination it will, perhaps, be found of leſs Conſequence than is generally imagined. Theſe Dramatick Tales, for ſo we may beſt ſtile ſuch Plays, have often occaſioned much Pleaſure to the Reader and Spectator, which could not poſſibly have been conveyed to them by any other Vehicle. Many an intereſting Story, which, from the Diverſity of its Circumſtances, cannot be regularly reduced either to Tragedy or Comedy, yet abounds with Character,

and

and contains ſeveral affecting Situations: And why ſuch a Story ſhould loſe its Force, dramatically related and aſſiſted by Repreſentation, when it pleaſes, under the colder Form of a Novel, is difficult to conceive. Experience has proved the Effect of ſuch Fictions on our Minds; and convinced us, that the Theatre is not that barren Ground, wherein the Plants of Imagination will not flouriſh. *The Tempeſt*, *the Midſummer Night's Dream*, *the Merchant of* Venice, *As you like it*, *Twelfth Night*, *the Faithful Shepherdeſs* of *Fletcher*, (with a much longer Liſt that might be added from *Shakeſpeare*, *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, and their Cotemporaries, or immediate Succeſſors) have moſt of them, within all our Memories, been ranked among the moſt popular Entertainments of the Stage. Yet none of theſe can be denominated Tragedy, Comedy, or Tragi-Comedy. The Play-Bills, I have obſerved, cautiouſly ſtile them Plays: And Plays indeed they are, truly ſuch, if it be the End of Plays to delight and inſtruct, to captivate at once the Ear, the Eye, and the Mind, by Situations forcibly conceived, and Characters truly delineated.

There is once Circumſtance in Dramatick Poetry, which, I think, the chaſtiſed Notions of our modern Criticks do not permit them ſufficiently to conſider. Dramatick Nature is of a more large and liberal Quality, than they are willing to allow. It does not conſiſt merely in the Repreſentation of Real Characters, Characters acknowledged to abound in common Life; but may be extended alſo to the Exhibition of imaginary Beings. To Create, is to be a Poet indeed; to draw down Beings from another Sphere, and endue them with ſuitable Paſſions, Affections, Diſpoſitions, allotting them at the ſame Time proper Employment; to *body forth*, by the Powers of Imagination, *the Forms of Things unknown*, and to *give to airy Nothing a local Habitation and a Name*, ſurely requires a Genius for the Drama equal, if not ſuperior, to the Delineation of Perſonages in the ordinary

dinary Courſe of Nature. *Shakeſpeare* in particular is univerſally acknowledged never to have ſoared ſo far above the Reach of all other Writers, as in thoſe Inſtances, where he ſeems purpoſely to have tranſgreſſed the Laws of Criticiſm. He appears to have diſdained to put his free Soul *into Circumſcription and Confine*, which denied his extraordinary Talents their full Play, nor gave Scope to the Boundleſneſs of his Imagination. His Witches, Ghoſts, Fairies, and other imaginary Beings, ſcattered through his Plays, are ſo many glaring Violations of the common Table of Dramatick Laws. What then ſhall we ſay? Shall we confeſs their Force and Power over the Soul, ſhall we allow them to be Beauties of the moſt exquiſite Kind, and yet inſiſt on their being expunged? And why? except it be to reduce the Flights of an exalted Genius, by fixing the Standard of Excellence on the Practice of inferior Writers, who wanted Parts to execute ſuch great Deſigns; or to accommodate them to the narrow Ideas of ſmall Criticks, who want Souls large enough to comprehend them?

Our Old Writers thought no Perſonage whatever, unworthy a Place in the Drama, to which they could annex what may be called a *Seity*; that is, to which they could allot Manners and Employment peculiar to itſelf. The ſevereſt of the Antients cannot be more eminent for the conſtant Preſervation of Uniformity of Character, than *Shakeſpeare*; and *Shakeſpeare*, in no Inſtance, ſupports his Characters with more Exactneſs, than in the Conduct of his ideal Beings. The Ghoſt in *Hamlet* is a ſhining Proof of this Excellence.

But, in conſequence of the Cuſtom of tracing the Events of a Play minutely from a Novel, the Authors were ſometimes led to repreſent a mere human Creature in Circumſtances not quite conſonant to Nature, of a Diſpoſition rather wild and extravagant, and in both Caſes more eſpecially repugnant to modern Ideas. This indeed required particular Indulgence

gence from the Spectator, but it was an Indulgence, which ſeldom miſſed of being amply repaid. Let the Writer but once be allowed, as a neceſſary *Datum*, the Poſſibility of any Character's being placed in ſuch a Situation, or poſſeſt of ſo peculiar a Turn of Mind, the Behaviour of the Character is perfectly natural. *Shakeſpeare*, though the Child of Fancy, ſeldom or never dreſt up a common Mortal in any other than the modeſt Dreſs of Nature: But many ſhining Characters in the Plays of *Beaumont* and *Fletcher* are not ſo well grounded on the Principles of the human Heart; and yet, as they were ſupported with Spirit, they were received with Applauſe. *Shylock*'s Contract, with the Penalty of the Pound of Fleſh, though not *Shakeſpeare*'s own Fiction, is perhaps rather improbable; at leaſt it would not be regarded as a happy Dramatick Incident in a modern Play; and yet, having once taken it for granted, how beautifully, nay, how *naturally*, is the Character ſuſtained!—Even this Objection therefore, of a Deviation from Nature, great as it may ſeem, will be found to be a Plea inſufficient to excuſe the total Excluſion of our antient Dramatiſts from the Theatre. *Shakeſpeare*, you will readily allow, poſſeſt Beauties more than neceſſary to redeem his Faults; Beauties, that excite our Admiration, and obliterate his Errors. True. But did no Portion of that divine Spirit fall to the Share of our other Old Writers? And can their Works be ſuppreſſed, or concealed, without Injuſtice to their Merit?

One of the beſt and moſt pleaſing Plays in *Maſſinger*, and which, we are told, was originally received with general Approbation, is called, *The* PICTURE. The Fiction, whence it takes its Title, and on which the Story of the Play is grounded, may be collected from the following ſhort Scene. *Mathias*, a Gentleman of *Bohemia*, having taken an affecting Leave of his Wife *Sophia*, with a Reſolution of ſerving in the King of

Hungary's Army againſt the *Turks*, is left alone on the Stage, and the Play goes on, as follows.

Math. I am ſtrangely troubled: Yet why ſhould I nouriſh
A Fury here, and with imagin'd Food?
Having no real Grounds on which to raiſe
A Building of Suſpicion ſhe ever was,
Or can be falſe hereafter? I in this
But fooliſhly inquire the Knowledge of
A future Sorrow, which, if I find out,
My preſent Ignorance were a cheap Purchaſe,
Though with my Loſs of Being. I have already
Dealt with a Friend of mine, a general Scholar,
One deeply read in Nature's hidden Secrets,
And (though with much Unwillingneſs) have won him
To do as much as Art can to reſolve me
My Fate that follows—To my Wiſh he's come.

Enter Baptiſta.

Julio Baptiſta, now I may affirm
Your Promiſe and Performance walk together;
And therefore, without Circumſtance, to the Point,
Inſtruct me what I am.

Bapt. I could wiſh you had
Made Trial of my Love ſome other Way.

Math. Nay, this is from the Purpoſe.

Bapt. If you can,
Proportion your Deſire to any Mean,
I do pronounce you happy: I have found,
By certain Rules of Art, your matchleſs Wife
Is to this preſent Hour from all Pollution
Free and untainted.

Math. Good.

Bapt. In reaſon therefore
You ſhould fix here, and make no farther Search
Of what may fall hereafter.

Math. O *Baptiſta!*
'Tis not in me to maſter ſo my Paſſions;
I muſt know farther, or you have made good
But half your Promiſe.—While my Love ſtood by,
Holding her upright, and my Preſence was
A Watch upon her, her Deſires being met too
With equal Ardour from me, what one Proof
Could ſhe give of her Conſtancy, being untempted?

But

But when I am abſent, and my coming back
Uncertain, and thoſe wanton Heats in Women
Not to be quench'd by lawful Means, and ſhe
The abſolute Diſpoſer of herſelf,
Without Controul or Curb; nay more, invited
By Opportunity and all ſtrong Temptations,
If then ſhe hold out———

Bapt. As no doubt ſhe will.

Math. Thoſe Doubts muſt be made Certainties, *Baptiſta*,
By your Aſſurance, or your boaſted Art
Deſerves no Admiration. How you trifle——
And play with my Affliction! I'm on
The Rack, till you confirm me.

Bapt. Sure, *Mathias*,
I am no God, nor can I dive into
Her hidden Thoughts, or know what her Intents are;
That is deny'd to Art, and kept conceal'd
E'en from the Devils themſelves: They can but gueſs,
Out of long Obſervation, what is likely;
But poſitively to foretel that this ſhall be,
You may conclude impoſſible; all I can
I will do for you. When you are diſtant from her
A thouſand Leagues, as if you then were with her,
You ſhall know truly when ſhe is ſolicited,
And how far wrought on.

Math. I deſire no more.

Bapt. Take then this little Model of *Sophia*,
With more than human Skill limn'd to the Life;
Each Line and Lineament of it in the Drawing
So punctually obſerv'd, that, had it Motion,
In ſo much 'twere herſelf.

Math. It is, indeed,
An admirable Piece; but if it have not
Some hidden Virtue that I cannot gueſs at,
In what can it advantage me?

Bapt. I'll inſtruct you.
Carry it ſtill about you, and as oft
As you deſire to know how ſhe's affected,
With curious Eyes peruſe it: While it keeps
The Figure it now has, entire and perfect,
She is not only innocent in Fact,
But unattempted; but if once it vary
From the true Form, and what's now White and Red
Incline to Yellow, reſt moſt confident
She's with all Violence courted, but unconquer'd.
But if it turn all Black, 'tis an Aſſurance

The Fort, by Compoſition or Surprize,
Is forc'd, or with her free Conſent, ſurrender'd.

Nothing can be more fantaſtick, or more in the extravagant Strain of the *Italian* Novels, than this Fiction: And yet the Play, raiſed on it, is extremely beautiful, abounds with affecting Situations, true Character, and a faithful Repreſentation of Nature. The Story, thus opened, proceeds as follows. *Mathias* departs, accompanied by his Friend, and ſerves as a Volunteer in the *Hungarian* Army againſt the *Turks*. A complete Victory being obtained, chiefly by Means of his Valour, he is brought by the General to the *Hungarian* Court, where he not only receives many Honours from the King, but captivates the Heart of the Queen; whoſe Paſſion is not ſo much excited by his known Valour or perſonal Attractions, as by his avowed Conſtancy to his Wife, and his firm Aſſurance of her reciprocal Affection and Fidelity to him. Theſe Circumſtances touch the Pride, and raiſe the Envy of the Queen. She reſolves, therefore, to deſtroy His conjugal Faith by giving up Her Own, and determines to make Him a deſperate Offer of Her Perſon; and, at the ſame Time, under Pretence of Notice of *Mathias* his being detained for a Month at Court, She diſpatches two debauched young Noblemen to tempt the Virtue of *Sophia*. Theſe Incidents occaſion ſeveral affecting Scenes both on the Part of the Huſband and Wife. *Mathias* (not with an unnatural and untheatrical Stoiciſm, but with the livelieſt Senſibility) nobly withſtands the Temptations of the Queen. *Sophia*, though moſt virtuouſly attached to her Huſband, becomes uneaſy at the feigned Stories, which the young Lords recount to her of his various Gallantries at Court, and in a Fit of Jealouſy, Rage, and Reſentment, makes a momentary Reſolution to give up her Honour. While ſhe is ſuppoſed to be yet under the Dominion

of

of this Reſolution, occurs the following Scene between the Huſband and his Friend.

MATHIAS *and* BAPTISTA.

Bapt. We are in a deſperate Straight; there's no Evaſion
Nor Hope left to come of, but by your yielding
To the Neceſſity; you muſt feign a Grant
To her violent Paſſion, or——
Math. What, my *Baptiſta*?
Bapt. We are but dead elſe.
Math. Were the Sword now heav'd up,
And my Neck upon the Block, I would not buy
An Hour's Reprieve with the Loſs of Faith and Virtue
To be made immortal here. Art thou a Scholar,
Nay, almoſt without a Parallel, and yet fear
To die, which is inevitable? You may urge
The many Years that by the Courſe of Nature
We may travel in this tedious Pilgrimage,
And hold it as a Bleſſing, as it is,
When Innocence is our Guide; yet know, *Baptiſta*,
Our Virtues are preferr'd before our Years,
By the great Judge. To die untainted in
Our Fame and Reputation is the greateſt;
And to loſe that, can we deſire to live?
Or ſhall I, for a momentary Pleaſure,
Which ſoon comes to a Period, to all Times
Have Breach of Faith and Perjury remembred
In a ſtill living Epitaph? No, *Baptiſta*,
Since my *Sophia* will go to her Grave
Unſpotted in her Faith, I'll follow her
With equal Loyalty: but look on this,
Your own great Work, your Maſter-piece, and then
She being ſtill the ſame, teach me to alter.
Ha! ſure I do not ſleep! or, if I dream,
[*The Picture altered.*
This is a terrible Viſion! I will clear
My Eyeſight, perhaps Melancholy makes me
See that which is not.
Bapt. It is too apparent.
I grieve to look upon't; beſides the Yellow,
That does aſſure ſhe's tempted, there are Lines
Of a dark Colour, that diſperſe themſelves
O'er every Miniature of her Face, and thoſe
Confirm——

Math.

Math. She is turn'd Whore.
Bapt. I muſt not ſay ſo.
Yet as a Friend to Truth, if you will have me
Interpret it, in her Conſent, and Wiſhes
She's falſe, but not in Fact yet.
Math. Fact! *Baptiſta?*
Make not yourſelf a Pandar to her Looſeneſs,
In labouring to palliate what a Vizard
Of Impudence cannot cover. Did e'er Woman
In her Will decline from Chaſtity, but found Means
To give her hot Luſt full Scope? It is more
Poſſible in Nature for groſs Bodies
Deſcending of themſelves, to hang in the Air,
Or with my ſingle Arm to underprop
A falling Tower; nay, in its violent Courſe
To ſtop the Light'ning, then to ſtay a Woman
Hurried by two Furies, Luſt and Falſhood,
In her full Career to Wickedneſs.
Bapt. Pray you temper
The Violence of your Paſſion.
Math. In Extreams
Of this Condition, can it be in Man
To uſe a Moderation? I am thrown
From a ſteep Rock headlong into a Gulph
Of Miſery, and find myſelf paſt Hope,
In the ſame Moment that I apprehend
That I am falling. And this, the Figure of
My Idol, few Hours ſince, while ſhe continued
In her Perfection, that was late a Mirror,
In which I ſaw miraculous Shapes of Duty,
Staid Manners, with all Excellency a Huſband
Could wiſh in a chaſte Wife, is on the ſudden
Turn'd to a magical Glaſs, and does preſent
Nothing but Horns and Horror.
Bapt. You may yet
(And 'tis the beſt Foundation) build up Comfort
On your own Goodneſs.
Math. No, that hath undone me,
For now I hold my Temperance a Sin
Worſe than Exceſs, and what was Vice a Virtue.
Have I refus'd a Queen, and ſuch a Queen
(Whoſe raviſhing Beauties at the firſt Sight had tempted
A Hermit from his Beads, and chang'd his Prayers
To amorous Sonnets,) to preſerve my Faith
Inviolate to Thee, with the Hazard of
My Death with Torture, ſince ſhe could inflict

No leſs for my Contempt, and have I met
Such a Return from Thee? I will not curſe Thee,
Nor for thy Falſhood rail againſt the Sex;
'Tis poor, and common; I'll only with wiſe Men
Whiſper unto myſelf, howe'er they ſeem,
Nor preſent, nor paſt Times, nor the Age to come
Hath heretofore, can now, or ever ſhall
Produce one conſtant Woman.
Bapt. This is more
Than the Satyriſts wrote againſt 'em.
Math. There's no Language
That can expreſs the Poiſon of theſe Aſpicks,
Theſe weeping Crocodiles, and all too little
That hath been ſaid againſt 'em. But I'll mould
My Thoughts into another Form, and if
She can outlive the Report of what I have done,
This Hand, when next ſhe comes within my Reach,
Shall be her Executioner.

The Fiction of *the* PICTURE being firſt allowed, the moſt rigid Critick will, I doubt not, confeſs, that the Workings of the human Heart are accurately ſet down in the above Scene. The Play is not without many others, equally excellent, both before and after it; nor in thoſe Days, when the Power of Magick was ſo generally believed, that the ſevereſt Laws were ſolemnly enacted againſt Witches and Witchcraft, was the Fiction ſo bold and extravagant, as it may ſeem at preſent. Hoping that the Reader may, by this Time, be ſomewhat reconciled to the Story, or even intereſted in it, I will venture to ſubjoin to the long Extracts I have already made from this Play one more Speech, where *the* PICTURE is mentioned very beautifully. *Mathias* addreſſes himſelf to the Queen in theſe Words.

Math. To ſlip once
Is incident, and excus'd by human Frailty;
But to fall ever, damnable. We were both
Guilty, I grant, in tendering our Affection,
But, as I hope you will do, I repented.

When

When we are grown up to Ripeneſs, our Life is
Like to this Picture. While we run
A conſtant Race in Goodneſs, it retains
The juſt Proportion. But the Journey being
Tedious, and ſweet Temptations in the Way,
That may in ſome Degree divert us from
The Road that we put forth in, e'er we end
Our Pilgrimage, it may, like this, turn Yellow,
Or be with Blackneſs clouded. But when we
Find we have gone aſtray, and labour to
Return unto our never-failing Guide
Virtue, Contrition (with unfeigned Tears,
The Spots of Vice waſh'd off) will ſoon reſtore it
To the firſt Pureneſs.

These ſeveral Paſſages will, I hope, be thought by the judicious Reader to be written in the free Vein of a true Poet, as well as by the exact Hand of a faithful Diſciple of Nature. If any of the above Arguments, or, rather, the uncommon Excellence of the great Writers themſelves, can induce the Critick to allow the Excurſions of Fancy on the Theatre, let him not ſuppoſe that he is here adviſed to ſubmit to the Perverſion of Nature, or to admire thoſe who over-leap the modeſt Bounds, which ſhe has preſcribed to the Drama. I will agree with him, that Plays, wherein the Truth of Dramatick Character is violated, can convey neither Inſtruction nor Delight. *Shakeſpeare*, *Jonſon*, *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, *Maſſinger*, &c. are guilty of no ſuch Violation. Indeed the Heroick Nonſenſe, which overruns the Theatrical Productions of *Dryden* *, *Howard*,

* Nobody can have a truer Veneration for the Poetical Genius of *Dryden*, than the Writer of theſe Reflections; but ſurely that Genius is no where ſo much obſcured, notwithſtanding ſome tranſient Gleams, as in his Plays; of which He had Himſelf no great Opinion, ſince the only Plea He ever urged in their Favour, was, that the Town had received with Applauſe Plays *equally bad*. Nothing, perhaps, but the abſurd Notion of Heroick Plays, could have carried the immediate Succeſſors to the Old Claſs of Writers into ſuch ridiculous Contradictions to Nature. That I may not appear ſingular in my Opinion

Howard, and the other illuſtrious Prototypes of *Bayes* in the *Rehearſal*, muſt nauſeate the moſt indulgent Spectator. The temporary Rage of falſe Taſte may perhaps betray the Injudicious into a fooliſh Admiration of ſuch Extravagance for a ſhort Period: But how will theſe Plays ſtand the Brunt of critical Indignation, when the Perſonages of the Drama are found to reſemble no Characters in Nature, except, perhaps, the diſordered Inhabitants of *Bedlam*?

If then it muſt be confeſſed both from Reaſon and Experience, that we can not only endure, but attend with Pleaſure to Plays, which are almoſt merely Dramatick Repreſentations of romantick Novels; it will ſurely be a further Inducement to recur to the Works of our Old Writers, when we find among them many Pieces written on a ſeverer Plan; a Plan, more accommodated to real Life, and approaching more nearly to the modern Uſage. *The Merry Wives of Windſor* of *Shakeſpeare*, *the Fox*, *the Alchymiſt*, *the Silent Woman*, *Every Man in his Humour* of *Jonſon*, *the New Way to pay old Debts*, *the City Madam* of *Maſſinger*, *&c. &c.* all urge their Claim for a Rank in the ordinary Courſe of our Winter-Evening Entertainments, not only clear of every Objection made to the abovementioned Species of Dramatick Compoſition, but adhering more ſtrictly to antient Rules, than moſt of our later Comedies.

In Point of Character, (perhaps the moſt eſſential Part of the Drama) our Old Writers far tranſcend the Moderns. It is ſurely needleſs, in Support of this Opinion to recite a long Liſt of Names, when the Memory of every Reader muſt ſuggeſt them to himſelf. The Manners of many of them, it is true, do not prevail at preſent. What then? Is it diſ-

Opinion of *Dryden*'s Dramatick Pieces, I muſt beg Leave to refer the Reader to *the Rambler*, No. 125, where that judicious Writer has produced divers Inſtances from *Dryden*'s Plays, *ſufficient* (to uſe *the Rambler*'s own Language) *to awaken the moſt torpid Riſibility.*

pleaſing or uninſtructive to ſee the Manners of a former Age paſs in Review before us? Or is the Mind undelighted at recalling the Characters of our Anceſtors, while the Eye is confeſſedly gratified at the Sight of the Actors dreſt in their antique Habits? Moreover, Faſhion and Cuſtom are ſo perpetually fluctuating, that it muſt be a very accurate Piece indeed, and one quite new and warm from the Anvil, that catches the *Damon* or *Cynthia* of this Minute. Some Plays of our lateſt and moſt faſhionable Authors are grown as obſolete in this Particular, as thoſe of the firſt Writers; and it may with Safety be affirmed, that *Bobadill* is not more remote from modern Character, than the ever-admired and everywhere-to-be-met-with Lord *Foppington*. It may, alſo, be further conſidered, that moſt of the beſt Characters in our old Plays are not merely fugitive and temporary. They are not the ſudden Growth of Yeſterday or To-day, ſure of fading or withering To-morrow; but they were the Delight of paſt Ages, ſtill continue the Admiration of the preſent, and (to uſe the Language of true Poetry)

——To Ages yet unborn appeal,
And lateſt Times th' ETERNAL NATURE feel.

The ACTOR.

There is one Circumſtance peculiar to the Dramatick Tales, and to many of the more regular Comedies of our old Writers, of which it is too little to ſay, that it demands no Apology. It deſerves the higheſt Commendation, ſince it hath been the Means of introducing the moſt capital Beauties into their Compoſitions, while the ſame Species of Excellence could not poſſibly enter into thoſe of a later Period. I mean the Poetical Stile of their Dialogue. Moſt Nations, except our own, have imagined mere Proſe, which, with *Moliere*'s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, the meaneſt of us have talked from our Cradle, too

little

little elevated for the Language of the Theatre. Our Neighbours, the *French*, at this Day write most of their Plays, Comedies as well as Tragedies, in Rhime; a *Gothick* Practice, which our own Stage once admitted, but long ago wisely rejected. The *Grecian* Iambick was more happily conceived in the true Spirit of that elegant and magnificent Simplicity, which characterized the Taste of that Nation. Such a Measure was well accommodated to the Expressions of the Mind, and though it refined indeed on Nature, it did not contradict it. In this, as well as in all other Matters of Literature, the Usage of *Greece* was religiously observed at *Rome*. *Plautus*, in his richest Vein of Humour, is numerous and poetical. The Comedies of *Terence*, though we cannot agree to read them after Bishop *Hare*, were evidently not written without Regard to Measure; which is the invincible Reason, why all Attempts to render them into downright Prose have always proved, and ever must prove, unsuccessful; and if a faint Effort, now under Contemplation, to give a Version of them in familiar Blank Verse (after the Manner of our Old Writers, but without a servile Imitation of Them) should fail, it must, I am confident, be owing to the Lameness of the Execution. The *English* Heroick Measure, or, as it is commonly called, Blank Verse, is perhaps of a more happy Construction even than the *Grecian* Iambick; elevated equally, but approaching nearer to the Language of Nature, and as well adapted to the Expression of Comick Humour as to the *Pathos* of Tragedy.

The mere Modern Critick, whose Idea of Blank Verse is perhaps attached to that empty Swell of Phraseology, so frequent in our late Tragedies, may consider these Notions as the Effect of Bigotry to our old Authors, rather than the Result of impartial Criticism. Let such an one carefully read over the Works of those Writers, for whom I am an Advocate. There he will seldom or ever find that Tu-

mour of Blank Verſe, to which He has been ſo much accuſtomed. He will be ſurpriſed with a familiar Dignity, which, though it riſes ſomewhat above ordinary Converſation, is rather an Improvement than Perverſion of it. He will ſoon be convinced, that Blank Verſe is by no Means appropriated ſolely to the Buſkin, but that the Hand of a Maſter may mould it to whatever Purpoſes he pleaſes; and that in Comedy, it will not only admit Humour, but heighten and embelliſh it. Inſtances might be produced without Number. It muſt however be lamented, that the Modern Tragick Stile, free, indeed, from the mad Flights of *Dryden*, and his Contemporaries, yet departs equally from Nature. I am apt to think it is in great Meaſure owing to the almoſt total Excluſion of Blank Verſe from all modern Compoſitions, Tragedy excepted. The common Uſe of an Elevated Diction in Comedy, where the Writer was often, of Neceſſity, put upon expreſſing the moſt ordinary Matters, and where the Subject demanded him to paint the moſt ridiculous Emotions of the Mind, was perhaps one of the chief Cauſes of that *eaſy Vigour*, ſo conſpicuous in the Stile of the old Tragedies. Habituated to Poetical Dialogue in thoſe Compoſitions, wherein They were obliged to adhere more ſtrictly to the Simplicity of the Language of Nature, the Poets learnt, in thoſe of a more raiſed Species, not to depart from it too wantonly. They were well acquainted alſo with the Force as well as Elegance of their Mother-Tongue, and choſe to uſe ſuch Words, as may be called Natives of the Language, rather than to *harmonize* their Verſes, and *agonize* the Audience with *Latin* Terminations. Whether the refined Stile of *Addiſon*'s *Cato*, and the flowing Verſification of *Rowe* firſt occaſioned this Departure from antient Simplicity it is difficult to determine: but it is too true, that *Southerne* was the laſt of our Dramatick Writers, who was, in any Degree, poſſeſt of that magnificent Plainneſs, which is

the

the genuine Dreſs of Nature; though indeed the Plays even of *Rowe* are more ſimple in their Stile, than thoſe which have been produced by his Succeſſors. It muſt not however be diſſembled in this Place, that the Stile of our Old Writers is not without Faults; that They were apt to give too much into Conceits; that They often perſued an allegorical Train of Thought too far; and were ſometimes betrayed into forced, unnatural, quaint, or gigantick Expreſſions. In the Works of *Shakeſpeare* himſelf every one of theſe Errors may be found; yet it may be ſafely aſſerted, that no other Author, antient or modern, has expreſſed himſelf on ſuch a Variety of Subjects with more Eaſe, and in a Vein more truly poetical, unleſs, perhaps, we ſhould except *Homer*: Of which, by the bye, the deepeſt Critick, moſt converſant with Idioms and Dialects, is not quite a competent Judge.

I would not be underſtood, by what I have here ſaid of Poetical Dialogue, to object to the Uſe of Proſe, or to inſinuate that our modern Comedies are the worſe for being written in that Stile. It is enough for me, to have vindicated the Uſe of a more elevated Manner among our Old Writers. I am well aware that moſt Parts of *Falſtaff*, *Ford*, *Benedick*, *Malvolio*, &c. are written in Proſe; nor indeed would I counſel a modern Writer to attempt the Uſe of Poetical Dialogue in a mere Comedy: A Dramatick Tale, indeed, chequered, like Life itſelf, with various Incidents, ludicrous and affecting, if written by a maſterly Hand, and ſomewhat more ſeverely than thoſe abovementioned, would, I doubt not, ſtill be received with Candour and Applauſe. The Publick would be agreeably ſurpriſed with the Revival of Poetry on the Theatre, and the Opportunity of employing all the beſt Performers, ſerious as well as comick, in one Piece, would render it ſtill more likely to make a favourable Impreſſion on the Audience. There is a Gentleman, not unequal to ſuch a Taſk,

a Task, who was once tempted to begin a Piece of this Sort; but, I fear, he has too much Love of Ease and Indolence, and too little Ambition of literary Fame, ever to complete it.

But to conclude:

Have I, Sir, been wasting all this Ink and Time in vain? Or may it be hoped that you will extend some of that Care to the rest of our Old Authors, which you have so long bestowed on *Shakespeare*, and which you have so often lavished on many a worse Writer, than the most inferior of those here recommended to You? It is certainly your Interest to give Variety to the Publick Taste, and to diversify the Colour of our Dramatick Entertainments. Encourage new Attempts; but do Justice to the Old: The Theatre is a wide Field. Let not one or two Walks of it alone be beaten, but lay open the Whole to the Excursions of Genius! This, perhaps, might kindle a Spirit of Originality in our modern Writers for the Stage; who might be tempted to aim at more Novelty in their Compositions, when the Liberality of the Popular Taste rendered it less hazardous. That the Narrowness of theatrical Criticism might be enlarged I have no Doubt. Reflect, for a Moment, on the uncommon Success of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Every Man in his Humour!* and then tell me, whether there are not many other Pieces of as antient a Date, which, with the like proper Curtailments and Alterations, would produce the same Effect? Has an industrious Hand been at the Pains to scratch up the Dunghill of *Dryden*'s *Amphitryon* for the few Pearls that are buried in it, and shall the rich Treasures of *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, *Jonson*, and *Massinger*, lie (as it were) in the Ore, untouched and disregarded? Reform your List of Plays! In the Name of *Burbage*, *Taylor*, and *Betterton*, I conjure you to it! Let the veteran Criticks once more have the Satisfaction of seeing *the Maid's Tragedy*, *Philaster*, *King and no King*, &c. on the Stage!—Restore

Fletcher's

Fletcher's Elder Brother to the Rank unjuſtly uſurped by *Cibber's Love makes a Man!* and ſince you have wiſely deſiſted from giving an annual Affront to the City by acting *the London Cuckolds* on Lord-Mayor's Day, why will you not pay them a Compliment, by exhibiting *the City Madam* of *Maſſinger* on the ſame Occaſion?

If after all, Sir, theſe Remonſtrances ſhould prove without Effect, and the Merit of theſe great Authors ſhould plead with You in vain, I will here fairly turn my Back upon you, and addreſs myſelf to the Lovers of Dramatick Compoſitions in general. They, I am ſure, will peruſe thoſe Works with Pleaſure in the Cloſet, though they loſe the Satisfaction of ſeeing them repreſented on the Stage: Nay, ſhould They, together with You, concur in determining that ſuch Pieces are unfit to be acted, You, as well as They, will, I am confident, agree, that ſuch Pieces are, at leaſt, very worthy to be read. There are many Modern Compoſitions, ſeen with Delight at the Theatre, which ſicken on the Taſte in the Peruſal; and the honeſt Country Gentleman, who has not been preſent at the Repreſentation, wonders with what his *London* Friends have been ſo highly entertained, and is as much perplexed at the *Town-manner* of Writing as Mr. *Smith* in *the Rehearſal*. The Excellencies of our Old Writers are, on the contrary, not confined to Time and Place, but always bear about them the Evidences of true Genius.

Maſſinger is perhaps the leaſt known, but not the leaſt meritorious of any of the old Claſs of Writers. His Works declare him to be no mean Proficient in the ſame School. He poſſeſſes all the Beauties and Blemiſhes common to the Writers of that Age. He has, like the reſt of them, in Compliance with the Cuſtom of the Times, admitted Scenes of a low and groſs Nature, which might be omitted with no more Prejudice to the Fable, than the Buffoonry in *Venice Preſerved*.

Preſerved. For his few Faults he makes ample Atonement. His Fables are, moſt of them, affecting; his Characters well conceived, and ſtrongly ſupported; and his Diction, flowing, various, elegant, and manly. His two Plays, revived by *Betterton, the Bondman*, and *the Roman Actor*, are not, I think, among the Number of his beſt. *The Duke of Milan, the Renegado, the Picture, the Fatal Dowry, the Maid of Honour, A New Way to pay Old Debts, the Unnatural Combat, the Guardian, the City Madam*, are each of them, in my Mind, more excellent. He was a very popular Writer in his own Times, but ſo unaccountably, as well as unjuſtly, neglected at preſent, that the accurate Compilers of a Work called *The Lives of the Poets*, publiſhed under the learned Name of the late Mr. *Theophilus Cibber*, have not ſo much as mentioned him. He is, however, take him for all in all, an Author, whoſe Works the intelligent Reader will peruſe with Admiration: And that I may not be ſuppoſed to withdraw my Plea for his Admiſſion to the Modern Stage, I ſhall conclude theſe Reflections with one more Specimen of his Abilities; ſubmitting it to all Judges of Theatrical Exhibitions, whether the moſt maſterly Actor would not here have an Opportunity of diſplaying his Powers to Advantage.

The Extract I mean to ſubjoin is from the laſt Scene of the firſt Act of *the Duke of Milan.*—*Sforza*, having eſpouſed the Cauſe of the King of *France* againſt the Emperor, on the King's Defeat, is adviſed by a Friend, to yield himſelf up to the Emperor's Diſcretion. He conſents to this Meaſure, but provides for his Departure in the following Manner.

Sfor. ——— Stay you, *Franciſco.*
—You ſee how Things ſtand with me?
Fran. To my Grief:
And if the Loſs of my poor Life could be
A Sacrifice, to reſtore them as they were,
I willingly would lay it down.

Sfor.

Sfor. I think ſo;
For I have ever found you true and thankful,
Which makes me love the Building I have rais'd,
In your Advancement; and repent no Grace,
I have confer'd upon you: And, believe me,
Though now I ſhould repeat my Favours to you,
The Titles I have given you, and the Means
Suitable to your Honours; that I thought you
Worthy my Siſter, and my Family,
And in my Dukedom made you next myſelf;
It is not to upbraid you; but to tell you
I find you're worthy of them, in your Love
And Service to me.
Fran. Sir, I am your Creature;
And any Shape that you would have me wear,
I gladly will put on.
Sfor. Thus, then, *Franciſco*;
I now am to deliver to your Truſt
A weighty Secret, of ſo ſtrange a Nature,
And 'twill, I know, appear ſo monſtrous to you,
That you will tremble in the Execution,
As much as I am tortur'd to command it:
For 'tis a Deed ſo horrid, that, but to hear it,
Would ſtrike into a Ruffian fleſh'd in Murthers,
Or an obdurate Hangman, ſoft Compaſſion;
And yet, *Franciſco* (of all Men the deareſt,
And from me moſt deſerving) ſuch my State
And ſtrange Condition is, that Thou alone
Muſt know the fatal Service, and perform it.
Fran. Theſe Preparations, Sir, to work a Stranger,
Or to one unacquainted with your Bounties,
Might appear uſeful; but, to Me, they are
Needleſs Impertinencies: For I dare do
Whate'er You dare command.
Sfor. But thou muſt ſwear it,
And put into thy Oath, all Joys, or Torments
That fright the Wicked, or confirm the Good:
Not to conceal it only (that is nothing)
But, whenſoe'er my Will ſhall ſpeak, ſtrike now!
To fall upon't like Thunder.
Fran. Miniſter
The Oath in any Way, or Form you pleaſe,
I ſtand reſolv'd to take it.
Sfor. Thou muſt do, then,
What no malevolent Star will dare to look on,

It is ſo wicked: For which, Men will curſe Thee
For being the Inſtrument; and the bleſt Angels
Forſake Me at my Need, for being the Author:
For 'tis a Deed of Night, of Night, *Franciſco*,
In which the Memory of all good Actions,
We can pretend to, ſhall be buried quick:
Or, if we be remember'd, it ſhall be
To fright Poſterity by our Example,
That have out-gone all Precedents of Villains
That were before us; and ſuch as ſucceed,
Though taught in Hell's black School, ſhall ne'er come near us.
—Art thou not ſhaken yet?

Fran. I grant you move me:
But to a Man confirm'd——

Sfor. I'll try your Temper:
What think you of my Wife?

Fran. As a Thing ſacred:
To whoſe fair Name, and Memory, I pay gladly
Theſe Signs of Duty. [*Kneels.*

Sfor. Is ſhe not the Abſtract
Of all that's rare, or to be wiſh'd in Woman?

Fran. It were a Kind of Blaſphemy to diſpute it:
—But to the Purpoſe, Sir.

Sfor. Add too her Goodneſs,
Her Tenderneſs of me, her Care to pleaſe me,
Her unſuſpected Chaſtity, ne'er equal'd,
Her Innocence, her Honour—O I am loſt
In the Ocean of her Virtues, and her Graces,
When I think of them.

Fran. Now I find the End
Of all your Conjurations: There's ſome Service
To be done for this ſweet Lady. If ſhe have Enemies
That ſhe would have remov'd——

Sfor. Alas! *Franciſco*,
Her greateſt Enemy is her greateſt Lover;
Yet, in that Hatred, her Idolator.
One Smile of her's would make a Savage tame;
One Accent of that Tongue would calm the Seas,
Though all the Winds at once ſtrove there for Empire.
Yet I, for whom ſhe thinks all this too little,
Should I miſcarry in this preſent Journey,
(From whence it is all Number to a Cypher,
I ne'er return with Honour) by thy Hand
Muſt have her murther'd.

Fran.

Fran. Murther'd!—She that loves ſo,
And ſo deſerves to be belov'd again?
And I, who ſometimes you were pleas'd to favour,
Pick'd out the Inſtrument?
Sfor. Do not fly off:
What is decreed, can never be recall'd.
'Tis more than Love to Her, that marks Her out
A wiſh'd Companion to me, in both Fortunes:
And ſtrong Aſſurance of thy zealous Faith,
That gives up to thy Truſt a Secret, that
Racks ſhould not have forc'd from me.—O *Franciſco*,
There is no Heav'n without Her; nor a Hell,
Where She reſides. I aſk from Her but Juſtice,
And what I would have paid to Her, had Sickneſs,
Or any other Accident divorc'd
Her purer Soul from her unſpotted Body.
The ſlaviſh *Indian* Princes, when they die,
Are chearfully attended to the Fire
By the Wife, and Slave, that living they lov'd beſt,
To do them Service in another World:
Nor will I be leſs honour'd, that love more.
And therefore trifle not, but in thy Looks
Expreſs a ready Purpoſe to perform
What I command; or, by *Marcelia*'s Soul,
This is thy lateſt Minute.
Fran. 'Tis not Fear
Of Death, but Love to you, makes me embrace it.
But, for mine own Security, when 'tis done,
What Warrant have I? If you pleaſe to ſign one,
I ſhall, though with Unwillingneſs and Horror,
Perform your dreadful Charge.
Sfor. I will, *Franciſco:*
But ſtill remember, that a Prince's Secrets
Are Balm, conceal'd; but Poiſon, if diſcover'd.
I may come back; then this is but a Trial,
To purchaſe thee, if it were poſſible,
A nearer Place in my Affection—but
I know thee honeſt.
Fran. 'Tis a Character
I will not part with.
Sfor. I may live to reward it. [*Exeunt.*

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